North, Gates Accounts Differ On Talk of CIA's Contra Role

Luncheon Followed Shooting Down of Resupply Plane

10/23/91

By George Lardner Jr. and Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writers

Oliver L. North said yesterday he did not tell then-CIA Deputy Director Robert M. Gates in October 1986 that the CIA was not involved in the Reagan White House's covert operation to resupply the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

The former White House aide provided a substantially different account than Gates has given of a crucial Oct. 9, 1986, luncheon that came weeks before the Iran-contra scandal was publicly disclosed.

Questioned about the luncheon during recent Senate hearings on his nomination to be CIA director, Gates said North had assured him and then-CIA Director William J. Casey that the intelligence agency was "completely clean" of any contact with those organizing and funding the operation.

The luncheon took place at CIA headquarters four days after the crash of a contra resupply plane in Nicaragua, threatening exposure of what became the Iran-contra scandal. Sandinista forces shot the plane down and captured a lone survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, who spoke of working with "CIA people."

North said yesterday that when he made statements about the CIA or the government being "clean," it was done only to assure officials that the secret resupply operation was "well-protected" and "no one was going to be able to tie this to the government."

"That is the way I put it," he said. "Don't worry about it. It's well protected. It's cleaned up."

Gates has said Casey arranged the luncheon to discuss a recent trip North had made to Frankfurt to meet with Iranian middlemen as part of a secret administration effort to free U.S. hostages in Lebanon by selling arms to Tehran. But North said the primary reason for the luncheon was to talk about Central America because "the hot item on everyone's calendar" was the Hasenfus shootdown and the resupply effort.

The luncheon "basically focused on shutting things down, getting all the assets out of the countryside" before U.S. involvement was exposed, he told reporters at a roundtable discussion in connection with his new book, "Under Fire."

Gates, who has testified about the luncheon numerous times since December 1986, has said he made special note of North's assurance that the CIA was "clean" in view of allegations in the press at the time of CIA wrongdoing involving the contras.

Gates also has maintained he did not know of North's operational role in the resupply network at the time of the luncheon, although other witnesses have testified that he did. Asked at his confirmation hearings why he would bother to ask North about CIA involvement if he thought North had no more than an advisory or fund-raising role, Gates said he "was trying to cross every 't' and dot every 'i.' . . . I was just pursuing a long shot."

Asked yesterday about Gates's assertion that he did not know about North's operational role, North said: "For someone [like Gates who was then deputy CIA director] not to have known that I was involved deeply in all manner of things [with the contras] had to be an almost conscious act of 'I didn't want to know.' "

North said his statements about the CIA being "clean" meant the secret resupply operation was "well-protected."

North's remarks make him the latest addition to a handful of people who have said they discussed with Gates North's role with the contras before it was announced from the White House on Nov. 25, 1986. At the same time, North said he dealt only infrequently with Gates in the Iran-contra affair and did not recall ever mentioning to him the diversion to aid the contras of profits from the arms sales to Iran.

Asked about Gates's prospective promotion to director, while several former CIA officers involved in the Iran-contra affair are facing criminal proceedings, North said: "I've stopped trying to figure out the ways of Washington. It's a little amazing the way it all works, not just with Gates, but lots of people."

North spoke bitterly of independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, who has been investigating the Iran-contra affair and brought charges against North, which ultimately were dismissed. North said Walsh's prosecutors once even had his wife, Betsy, fingerprinted and her mug shot taken, thereby implicitly threatening her with jail and loss of their children unless North agreed to become a government witness.

A spokeswoman for Walsh, Mary Belcher, said, "No threats were made of Colonel North or his wife or family by any member of this staff." Asked if Betsy North was fingerprinted and photographed, Belcher declined to answer.

Staff researcher Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.